



## Interventions in the political geographies of ‘area’



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### Introduction

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In February 2015, Hugh Williamson warned in the *Times Higher Education* against the University of Manchester’s possible withdrawal of funding from its Turkish, Persian and Hebrew programmes. He explained that these courses were connected to ‘countries of high strategic importance’ and argued that the threat from Islamic State necessitated the exact opposite, a revamped ‘Oriental Studies’ (Williamson, 2015). In raising such concerns, Williamson was not alone. A year earlier, just after the Ukrainian uprising, there were fears that decreasing levels of funding for East European Studies meant that US academia no longer possessed sufficient understanding of Putin’s Russia, and that this was detrimental to US foreign policy (Stent, 2014).

This apparent crisis in Area Studies marks a stark contrast to claims of a contemporaneous halcyon age for the discipline of

Geography in the UK. In August 2015, following large growth in the number of school students studying Geography at Advanced Level in England and Wales, the English daily *The Guardian* commented that “A star is born. Geography, for so long a Cinderella subject ... is soaring in popularity” (Guardian, 2015). As a discipline, Geography has based much of its public standing and popularity on the study of areas. Whilst reliance on colonial and geopolitical imaginations of global geographies has been criticized since the 1990s (Gregory, 1994; Lewis & Wigen, 1997), it remains the case that some of the best-selling books by geographers focus on descriptions of an areally-differentiated world (Rowntree, Lewis, Price, & Wyckoff, 2015). Geographical thought is intimately intertwined with the construction of areal knowledge. The disciplines of Geography and Area Studies are therefore partly interdependent, and their pasts and futures are coeval. For these reasons, we argue that it is necessary for political geographers to revisit the contested study of areas.

This set of interventions therefore re-examines the practices, institutions and knowledges involved in the political geographies of area. There has been important previous work that has pursued such questions across a range of sites and epochs, including early twentieth-century Britain (Dickinson & Howarth, 1933), Cold War America (Farish, 2005), post-1991 Europe (Toal, 2003) and globalizing North America in the late 1990s (Lewis & Wigen, 1997). At the heart of our discussion though, are the ways in which the study of areas remains imbricated with questions of geography and geopolitics. In particular, we want to examine the consequences of the shift from attempts to hold interdisciplinary knowledges and expertise within the single individual, so creating the *geographer* (in the terms of the ‘New Geography’ of late nineteenth-century Europe), to a related, but nevertheless distinct, interdisciplinary project of forcing multiple experts together into new institutional spaces of ‘Area Studies’ later in the twentieth century. Our contention is that the differences, commonalities and historicity of these two approaches to areal knowledges have never been fully appreciated by historians of either project, and that further consideration is imperative.

After 1945, the United States invested heavily in Area Studies

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institutes and programmes, which offered an interdisciplinary approach, language training and, where possible, immersion in local cultures. Although these new fields clearly aimed to produce knowledge that was geopolitically useful, these institutes were only indirectly the heirs of political geography. Neither the political geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1897) nor his disciple Karl Haushofer (1931) had referred in their reflections on 'political areas' and 'pan-regions' to the need for a specialized 'Area Studies'. Notwithstanding, at various points in their careers, both Ratzel and Haushofer dedicated themselves to the study of a particular area: Ratzel became something of an Americanist and Haushofer was a leading expert on the Japanese military. In many ways, therefore, post-1945 Area Studies continued to offer, in a more institutionally-expansive fashion, what a version of European political geography had promised until its demise in the middle of the twentieth century – empirical knowledges about far-away places that were strategically important. Indeed, there is arguably something in the very practice of delimiting areas that invites the Olympian gaze of geopolitics (Klinke, 2014).

In past decades, political geography has been revived in response to new challenges and enthusiasms. Within and across these debates, the study of areas has remained an important source of legitimization for many political geographers. And yet, all human geographers remain ambivalent about the development of area specialisms. The need for the study of regions was the historical inspiration of the discipline of Geography, but it has also often remained a source of its intellectual limitation and even embarrassment, we argue, precisely because of the echoes of *geopolitik*. The influential American historian of geography, Richard Hartshorne (1939) was inspired by this German geographical tradition, but attempted to separate it from its geopolitical apogee in order to re-cast an *idiographic* version of regional geography in the US after 1945.

For recent political geographers, the inheritances of area specialisms have been particularly difficult, as they became associated with the well-documented 'moribund' period for the subdiscipline during the 1950s and 1960s (Powell, 2015a). As is discussed in the interventions that follow, political geographers contribute to the disciplinary framing and knowledges of particular global areas in different ways. But this also means that the interdisciplinary interlocutors for political geographers vary according to different areas of the world. All specialisms in Area Studies have their dominant disciplines, dominant theories, dominant centres of excellence and so on. This leads to proclivities and predispositions. One might think of the influence of certain forms of subaltern histories within South East Asian Studies, or the strength of particular schools of Economics and Politics in African Studies. Other parts of the world are (still) not granted status as a Major Area, such as in the case of 'Circumpolar Studies'. Furthermore, these ways of shaping the world are constantly contested, such as in recent debates about Zomia (Scott, 2009), or in attempts to re-scape global geographies by focusing on oceanic regions (Blum, 2013; Steinberg, 2013).

In these interventions, we examine further the political geographies of area, raising three sets of interconnected questions. Respondents were asked to respond to each of these, and inevitably interpret the issues with a degree of variance. Firstly, we investigate the institutional relationships between political geographers and 'area specialists'. What arrangements emerged, existed and persisted? How did these differ for the study of Europe, Africa or Asia? Secondly, we interrogate the relationship between area and theory. What are the political effects of theorization on core-periphery relations in the global academy? Thirdly, we inquire into the politics of the construction of areal knowledge. What might a revived political geography of areas look like? What places might

be studied and how? What comparative themes or, as Benedict Anderson (2016) has it, 'frameworks of comparison' would persist?

Drawing from discussions at an Oxford workshop, 'Geographies of "Area": politics, places and disciplines', held in January 2015, the essays that follow deal with the different ways that areas have been classified, catalogued and theorized by political geographers. Inevitably, we contributors bear the influences of our own locat- edness. Many of the contributors are based at British universities that have recently been encouraged to reflect on the colonial heritage of their infrastructure, finances and pedagogy, as indicated by the #RhodesMustFall protests in Oxford during 2015 and 2016 (Garton Ash, 2016). However, we are also global subjects, with citizenship and educational qualifications from across continents. As political geographers are well aware, the politics of location and voice are never easily attributed. But this is precisely our point. The delimitation of areas and the critical traditions of their study have persistent *political* consequences. In addressing such issues, then, each contribution draws attention to the political consequences of the study of area and the development of areal expertise, both within and without disciplines. They do not all agree on the histories, presents and futures of the political geographies of area, but do share a desire to continue thinking through their relationships.

### **Fin de siècle disciplinarity and 'the natural region'**

Richard C. Powell

Many social science disciplines are hesitant over regional specialism, placing it in opposition to theory creation and circulation. This intervention historicizes this ambivalence and investigates its emergence during the very moment of *modern*, European disciplinarity in the late nineteenth century. It argues that emergent framings of natural regions, evident for example in the work of geographer Andrew J. Herbertson, resulted from a certain vision of globalism that was critical to the fin de siècle delineation of *both* disciplines and areas. Moreover, these imaginaries remain dominant in political understandings of the purposes and uses of regional knowledge today.

As the IR scholar Karoline Postel-Vinay (2015) argues, the second half of the nineteenth century was critical for the emergence of the notion of *globality*. The emergent physicality of the earth in this period underpinned a new political geography (Heffernan, 2011). As Postel-Vinay (2015, 324) puts it, there is a need to understand "how the physical finitude of the planet became the fundamental principle of regulation of a specific international order – the European one – and how that order aimed to planetary hegemony". This particular formation of the global, argues Postel-Vinay, is the most important *imperial* legacy of the nineteenth century. As intellectual historians have shown though, this period was also about the emergence of *disciplinarity*. Scholars were attempting to constitute new fields, but always in dialogue with other disciplines and other intellectual histories (Anderson & Valente, 2002).

It was within this *milieu* that the Oxford geographer A.J. Herbertson sketched his vision for the teaching of *systematic geography* before a meeting of the Research Department of the Royal Geographical Society on 29 February 1904 (Herbertson, 1905). The point of his thesis was to outline a system of *natural regions* to aid in the instruction of geography at the universities. Initially trained as a botanist, for Herbertson: "A natural region should have a certain unity of configuration, climate, and vegetation" (Herbertson, 1905, 309). Herbertson envisaged that a geographical novitiate would be taught this framework, and then might specialize in one or a number of these regions. This areal framing was to provide a further *pedagogical* basis for Halford Mackinder's 'New Geography' as it was being institutionalized in Britain, and in similar idioms in

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